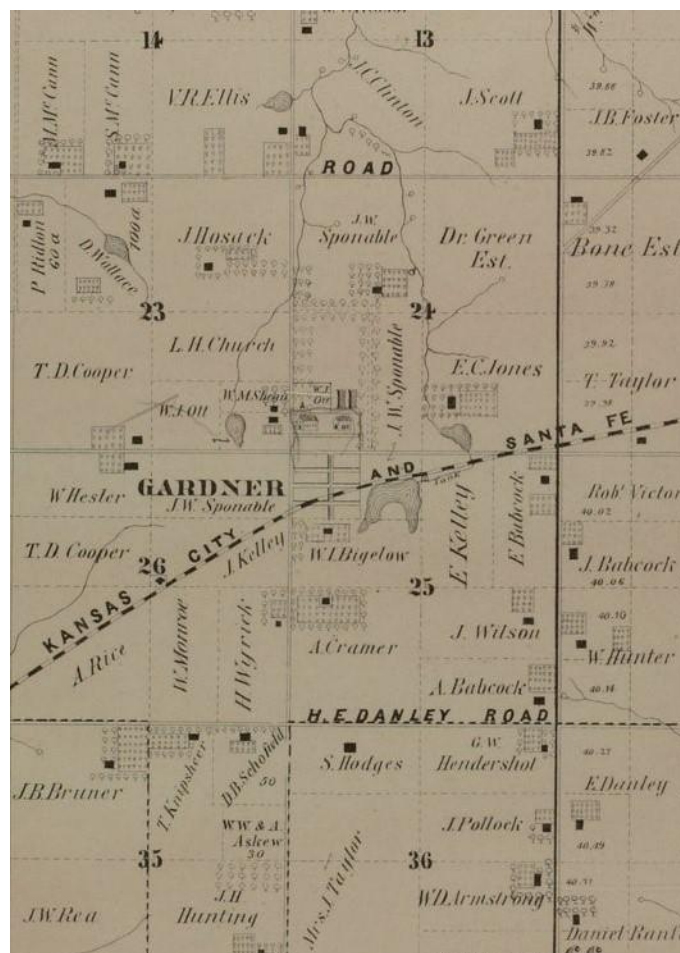


Panic Spreads in Johnson County as a Nation divides: a look back  
at forgotten Tuscarora Lake

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It is not exactly clear what became of the forgotten settlement known as Tuscarora Lake; however, clues from the town's past can be examined to better expose the reality behind Tuscarora Lake's demise. The ending of Tuscarora Lake was directly linked to national events, beginning with the border ruffian William C. Quantrill, the Border Wars between Kansas and Missouri, as well as the Civil War. This study uses old maps, field work, a personal diary, and newspaper articles to reconstruct this history.

Tuscarora Lake was a short-lived town that was established in 1857 and curiously met its end in 1863. It was located in southern Johnson County, in Gardener Township, a region which had previously belonged to the Shawnee Indian tribe under the reservation system of the 1830s and 1840s. Tuscarora Lake was about five miles south of Olathe and three miles south of the Santa Fe Trail. The settlement was originally lined with streams, ponds, and timber belts, which provided the logs for the first cabins. The streams that were within miles of the settlement included Cedar creek, Kill creek, Mill creek, and Turkey creek. The Blue and Indian creeks run eastward, and two forks of Bull Creek run south. There were numerous springs providing excellent well water. The timber belts were located along the streams and somewhat enclosed the settlement. The main varieties of trees that grew in the area consisted of ash, hackberry, hickory, oak, sycamore and walnut. The land on which the town site was located on also happened to be excellent farmland as well, especially in terms of harvesting the early crops of wheat, corn, oats, potatoes, wild and tame grasses. The site was a seemingly delightful location for any pioneer.<sup>1</sup>

Today, it is not exactly clear what became of the forgotten settlement known as Tuscarora Lake; still, part of the town's allure pertains to its mysteriousness. Despite the town's hasty end, clues from the community's past can be examined to better expose the reality behind Tuscarora Lake's demise. The ending was directly linked to national

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<sup>1</sup> Description of early Johnson County in William G. Cutler, *Cutler's History of the State of Kansas* (Chicago IL: A. T. Andreas, 1883).

events, beginning with the border ruffian William C. Quantrill, the Border Wars between Kansas and Missouri, as then the Civil War.

The first settlers of Tuscarora Lake appear to be originally from Canal Dover, Ohio, an unusual migration to have occurred in 1857 because most Ohioans typically would have moved southwest, towards Kansas, after 1865.<sup>2</sup> Canal Dover was located in Tuscarawas County, hence the likely name of Tuscarora Lake where they settled. While the motives surrounding their arrival in Johnson County remain unclear, one thing is certain: the 1850s Ohio settlers came in waves. For example, Charles Wood, a founding member of Tuscarora Lake was a part of the second wave out of approximately three migrations to come into the Kansas territory. Wood and his family arrived in the territory on June 1, 1857.<sup>3</sup> Initially, Wood and his family stayed with friends from Ohio who resided in southern Johnson County, Kansas. Wasting no time, Wood claimed an adjoining piece of land near his fellow Ohioan constituents; and within only a short period of time, the settlement of Tuscarora Lake would proudly be born. The third and last influx of people who followed Wood presumably arrived throughout the settlement's remaining years. From 1857 until 1863, some of the arriving residents came from more common parts of the country like Missouri or Iowa, while others had even emigrated from far away countries such as Scotland.<sup>4</sup> Yet, during the settlement's short-lived existence, the majority of residents once called Ohio home.

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<sup>2</sup> George H. Hildt, *The diary of George H. Hildt*. Vol 10: June to December 1857, Kansas State Historical Society. <https://ksks.org/p/kansas-historical-quarterly-the-diary-of-george-h-hildt/12871>

<sup>3</sup> Hildt, June to December, 1857.

<sup>4</sup> William G. Cutler, "Johnson County," in *Cutler's History of the State of Kansas*.

It is possible that the settlers who shared the same town may have not shared similar opinions in regards to the many severe issues that were dividing America during the mid to late nineteenth century. Before Kansas became a state in 1861, the issue of the territory becoming a slave or free state was growing more violent and daunting each year. Pro-slavery Missourians would cross the Kansas border in order to sway elections one way or another, as well as raid and terrorize towns on or near the Kansas and Missouri border. Obviously, since they were not actual residents to the area, their votes were fraudulent and misrepresenting. Due to the chaos surrounding the voting system, great lengths were taken to provide guards for the ballot boxes, as well as more security in general. However this proved to have been only a temporary fix to the looming border conflict between Kansas and Missouri.

To specify, the original settlers from Ohio were undoubtedly anti-slavery, according to Hildt's diary entries, as well as the fact that Ohio was a free state before the Civil War. For example, J. Hobart Hunting, a farmer and stock raiser from Ohio, came to live in the southeast corner of Tuscarora Lake in 1857. After three years he moved his family to the area. Hunting provides a glimpse into the life of a typical Ohioan living at the new settlement. He and his wife had five children together.<sup>5</sup> The household can easily be imagined as a strict environment with practicing Baptists who unsurprisingly shunned all popular vices. Importantly, they also radically opposed slavery.

Others who arrived at Tuscarora Lake from places like Missouri undoubtedly supported slavery and wanted to see it thrive in Kansas; these individuals were motivated by the undecided future of the territory. Among this handful of people was the former

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<sup>5</sup>Cutler, "Johnson County, " in *Cutler's History of the State of Kansas*.

Ohio schoolteacher who later became known as the infamous confederate guerrilla leader, William C. Quantrill.

In the spring of 1857 Quantrill arrived in Kansas with Colonel Harry Torrey and H.V. Beeson. They surveyed the land and eventually claimed a portion of Tuscarora Lake. Quantrill worked for Beeson and Torrey during their brief stay at the settlement; however, eventually Quantrill's violent side was exposed as he attempted to murder his companion Beeson. Quantrill also stole provisions and blankets from the men; he then hastily sold them for a quick buck to unsuspecting settlers. When he was caught, he was promptly driven out of the town and never returned. Not long after, Quantrill began the horrific series of raids across Kansas and Missouri, which solidified him as an infamous criminal.<sup>6</sup>

Quantrill's raids transpired anxiously close to the settlement of Tuscarora Lake, particularly in the nearby towns that were frequented by the residents of Tuscarora Lake. Such a community was the town of Olathe, which is about five miles north from the settlement. Before the Civil War, Quantrill was responsible for leading a gang of pro-slavery Missourians into Kansas towns close to the Missouri border and causing as much mayhem and panic as possible. For example, through the entirety of 1862, Quantrill and his men violently ransacked the up and coming towns of Olathe, Shawnee and Lawrence. During the infamously bloody raid on Olathe, Quantrill had gathered a posse of approximately one hundred and forty men after being informed of the town's lack of security. From the start of their arrival in Kansas, the killing began; it also didn't let up. After enclosing the town's residents in the public square, Quantrill and his band of

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<sup>6</sup> "Quantrill and the Border Wars," *Chanute Daily Tribune*, Jan. 23, 1911.

constituents began taking anything they wanted, going from house-to-house, store-to-store, stealing horses and anything with a slight value to it, all the while murdering anyone who got in the way.<sup>7</sup> After his success in Olathe, Quantrill seemingly had the confidence to continue to take on more unsuspecting towns. In addition to the tragic loss of life, extensive damage and irretrievable stolen properties, the town had most of all lost its feeling of security. Residents in nearby Tuscarora Lake would have feared for their lives. Tensions around the border continued to rise and eventually soldiers had to be brought into town for protection.<sup>8</sup>

Raids, such as Quantrill's raid on Olathe, could easily topple the most prosperous of towns. In fact, Olathe was lucky to have recovered from everything that it had lost, including residents who had moved away out of fear. It is a strong possibility that Tuscarora Lake was a victim of the border wars. Perhaps the town suffered too much damage from pro-slavery border ruffians and simply did not recover. While this is one explanation concerning the mysterious disappearance of Tuscarora Lake, there is another more plausible reason which points directly to the outbreak of the Civil War. During the start of the war, many settlers went home, either to Ohio or Missouri, to enlist alongside their friends and family. It is likely that the town was small enough that when the men left to enlist, the town was empty. With the growth of nearby more populous towns including Olathe, Gardener, Shawnee and even Lawrence, coupled with the likelihood of over half of Tuscarora Lake's population fighting in or incapacitated by the war in some

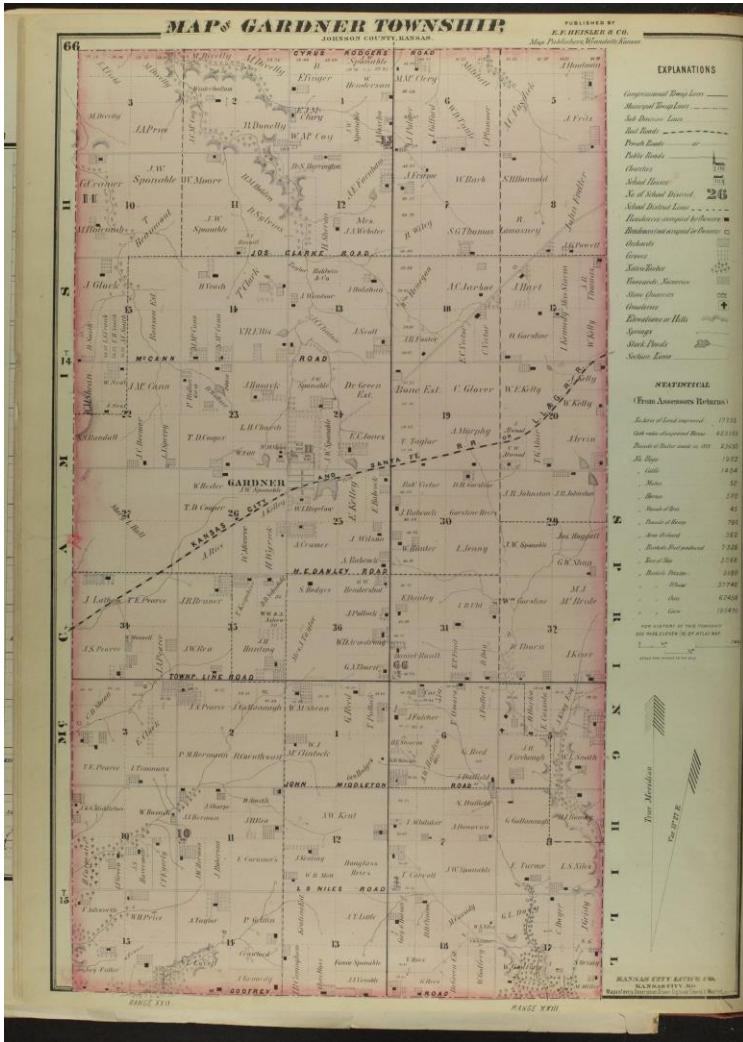
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<sup>7</sup>Cutler, "Johnson County," in *Cutler's History of the State of Kansas*.

<sup>8</sup>"Quantrill, the Man Who Spread Terror in Kansas," *The Topeka Daily Capital*, Dec 12, 1909.

way; one can speculate the already small settlement could not overcome the tragedy that was the Civil War.

Today, Tuscarora Lake can be found, located on the northeastern outskirts of



Gardener, Kansas, as seen on the atlas below.<sup>9</sup> Head south about five miles from Olathe and reach the BNSF Railway. Then follow the tracks east because the railroad went directly through the former town site. Heavily-wooded areas and a great many ponds are still prevalent to the region today. These landmarks will help provide clues into the town's whereabouts. Continue east until reaching a curve in the

train tracks; this means the old town is near. As The New Century Air Center approaches,

Tuscarora Lake will be a mile or so to the right of it. Nearby the former

Figure 1: Atlas Map of Gardner Township, SOURCE: E.F. Heisler and D.W. Smith, *Atlas Map of Johnson County, Kansas*, 1874.

settlement, on the southwestern corner will also be a church; this too validates that the town was close by. The settlement consisted of several cabins made from timber. Yet unsurprisingly, the original structures have long been gone. Currently the space where the town once was is being cleared for a housing development. Still, the lake that the town was named after remains, as seen in the present-day photograph below.<sup>10</sup> The ending of Tuscarora Lake was directly linked to national events, which began with the border ruffian William C. Quantrill and sadly ended in the Civil War.

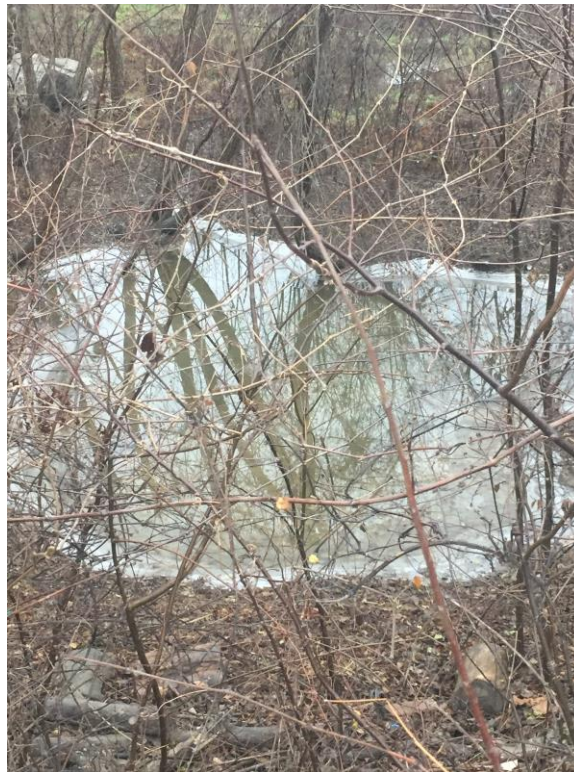


Figure 2: Modern photograph of Tuscarora Lake, SOURCE: Taken by author, December, 2016.



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